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To: School District Administrators
School Principals
School Nurses

From: Mark Wegner, MD, MPH, Chief
Communicable Disease Epidemiology Section

and Linda Caldart-Olson, RN, School Nurse Consultant
Department of Public Instruction

Subject: Statewide Pertussis Outbreak

We are writing to alert you to the current major outbreak of pertussis (whooping cough) in Wisconsin. Pertussis is a contagious bacterial disease which initially presents with cold-like symptoms in its early stage, with a progressively worsening cough. While pertussis may not be life threatening to most school aged children, this group often comes in contact with younger children and infants who may be at higher risk of developing serious complications of pertussis.

To date there have been over 1200 confirmed or probable cases reported since January 1, 2004 compared to 708 cases in all of 2003. Between 1999 to 2002 Wisconsin has had less than 200 reported cases per year. Attached you will find the number of cases reported by county by month of cough onset in 2004. Although the primary focus of the current pertussis outbreak is in southeastern Wisconsin, cases are being reported throughout the state. School aged children account for over 55% of all reported cases and significant incidence of disease has continued during the summer. This is a major concern because during the summer children do not have the same type of prolonged indoor, face-to-face, exposure that occurs during the school year. Therefore, if we are not vigilant, control of the outbreak may be extremely difficult when children are back in school.

Pertussis Disease Fact Sheet and disease reporting

Enclosed you will find a Pertussis Disease Fact Sheet that provides more detailed information about the signs and symptoms of disease. By statute, confirmed or suspect cases of pertussis must be reported to the local health department within 24 hours of notification. It is important that if a parent informs school staff that their child has either suspect or confirmed pertussis disease that the school immediately contact the local health department to report the illness. Please be aware that pertussis can also occur in school staff. Please share this information with

your school nurses, health room staff, school secretaries, teachers and anyone else who may receive reports of illness from parents.

Exclusion from School

Individuals with either suspect or confirmed pertussis must be excluded from school until they have received at least five days of antibiotic treatment. The antibiotic treatment will make the person non-contagious and therefore allow them to return to school after the five days of treatment. However, the symptoms may still be present after the completion of the course of treatment. If, upon follow-up investigation by the local health department, it is determined there was significant exposure to other students at school, antibiotic prophylaxis may be recommended to prevent the exposed students from becoming ill. The health department will assist you with the process of informing students of the exposure and taking the steps necessary to prevent disease in exposed students and staff.

In our efforts to limit the spread of disease it is important that all school staff - especially those that lead extracurricular activities that require mandatory attendance - understand the importance of reporting suspect pertussis disease and the need to exclude students that are suspected of having the disease. This includes your athletic director, coaches, band director and club advisors, etc. Although pertussis may not be easily spread during outdoor activities, it can easily be spread within the close confines of the locker room and/or weight room and other indoor meeting areas. Bus trips to school or school related events are also potential environments for disease transmission. The occurrence of a communicable disease such as pertussis can have a negative impact on a successful academic, athletic and extracurricular season.

Vaccine

When your staff monitors the immunization records of students this fall please assure that children in kindergarten and first grade meet the immunization requirements for the Diphtheria, Tetanus, acellular Pertussis (DTaP) vaccine. The vaccine is usually given in a series of five injections beginning at 2 months of age. A booster dose is recommended at 4-5 years of age. The Wisconsin Student Immunization Law requires that students receive at least 4 doses of the DTaP vaccine. One dose is required after the fourth birthday. The currently licensed vaccine in the United States cannot be given to children 7 years of age and older.

Sample Parent Letter

Also enclosed you will find a sample letter to parents that is designed to make them aware of the pertussis outbreak and asks them to keep their children home from school if the child has possible symptoms of the disease. Please include the parent letter with any future mailing to parents along with the enclosed Pertussis Disease Fact Sheet. The handouts can also be made available at school offices.

Your assistance in curtailing this disease outbreak is appreciated. Please contact your local health department if you have any questions.

cc Local Public Health Departments